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ABSTRACT

A case study explored the ways in which a primary grade teacher selected instructional materials. The teacher had nearly 25 years of experience in the field. Data were gathered through 10 weekly interviews of about a half hour each, during which videotapes of the teacher's classroom practices were reviewed. Areas covered under the study included: the text as a set curriculum; reflections on the teacher's choices of instructional materials; the source of the teacher's instructional ideas; the teacher as "scrounger"; instructional materials and parent involvement; and instructional materials as outside experiences. Specific detail is presented on the teacher's views on these areas, and a description is given of the teacher's decision-making processes in selecting instructional materials. (CB)

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HOW ONE TEACHER SELECTS INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

John D. Elliott

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I wanted to find out what it was about commercially prepared instructional materials that teachers found to be important. Presumably, if the material had these attributes in a negative quality, the teacher would either not select it, or use it in a way not intended by the material's creator. If these aspects were present in their positive quality, the material would be more likely to be adopted by the teacher and less likely to be modified in classorom use.

Teachers are by a slight majority, the selectors of their instructional materials. While it is acknowledged that mutual adaptation is inevitable, it would seem likely that fidelity of the classroom use to material designer's intentions would be greater if the material were attractive to the teacher.

My initial intention was to observe both individual teachers and teacher committees as they selected materials, in order to discover the criteria they used. My advisor, Dr. John Hayscm suggested that instead I get to know the decision-making processes of one teacher in some depth. I might in this manner better appreciate the range and qualities of influences on one teacher's decision-making. This might suggest what other teachers found to be important. Whether there were identity of influences might be determined by a number of additional case studies, or by a generally administered questionnaire.

As might be expected with the kind of investigation in which the questions are not predetermined, and the effort to discover is a collaboration of interviewer and interviewee, as much was revealed about teaching styles, and different ways of teaching reading, as about our main question, which was what makes a commercially prepared instructional material attractive to a teacher.

The teacher I asked to work with me, Glenda, has taught for nearly twenty-five years usually in the primary-grade four range. She took her teacher training at a

teachers' college, and referred more often to professional rather than academic courses that she had taken since then on a continuing education basis. At present, she is teaching grades three and four reading and language arts, and most of the remaining subjects to her grade three home room. She lives in one of the small rural communities served by the school, and knows many of the parents socially. Besides teaching, and raising her family, she is involved in a sorority, the 4H, and church work.

I knew Glenda from having taught her in summer school, and having visited her classroom during practice teaching. She struck me as an interesting and interested teacher who had thought about why she was doing what she was doing.

We agreed to a series of weekly interviews which I would record on an audio cassette recorder. Beginning in October, there were eventually ten interviews of about a half hour each, interspersed with construction of repertory grids, and the videotaping of a social studies lesson. Subsequently a primary teacher was videotaped while teaching, at her request, and interviewed after viewing her lesson.

In most cases, my observations regarding each interview were shared with Glenda so that she could confirm or modify what I had said. In this sense, our work was a collaboration. I was fortunate in that she expanded without much suggestion on my part on each of her responses to my questions, so that she tended to dwell upon what she felt was important, rather than simply replying to my questions.

I wanted to find out what she felt was important about instructional materials. As I previously stated, I found out much more. What I will here stress, are her comments on commercially prepared materials.

The Text as a Set Curriculum

Glenda in some subject areas saw the textbook as the course of study. A committee of area teachers from different levels "...felt there was a need for a set

curriculum for grammar because each teacher was doing his or her own and not necessarily was there a buildup from grade to grade." They drew up a tentative curriculum and at the same time the central office and two professors from Teachers' College selected a text series that would have a progression from grades three to six.

The main reason for doing this seems to have been, "Because the Junior high teachers felt that the kids were coming in and not really prepared with the things that they were hoping they were, should have." The Junior high English teacher they are sending their students to now feels "...the children perhaps have covered a set thing."

There should be a progression in what children learn, and there ought to be a similarity in what children from different classes study. This was stressed by both the curriculum committee which included several grade levels, and the Junior high teacher who received Glenda's students. It would appear that the teachers of higher grades were dictating to the lower grade teachers what should be taught so that their own teaching job would be easier. A commonly used text series would provide a "set curriculum."

Glenda accepted the externally imposed text and curriculum without complaint. "...if you don't have a set curriculum, it's very easy to do what you feel that child needs and maybe you're forgetting what should he have had by now and what should he know before he goes along to the next year and the next teacher." A commonly used text is a way of providing the set curriculum.

She varies her textbook use by digging up her own exercises "...whenever they're having difficulties like capital letters on streets and abbbreviations. Then you dig up more materials. But this certainly gives you the headline and then you fill in the remaining difficulty...."

Here she seems to be using the textbook as a table of contents of her curriculum, while she adapts each section of the course to her students' needs.

Although part of the time she uses a nontext approach in teaching reading, most often she uses a core text because "...I feel that it keeps me on the track for the basic skills that are required for certain levels."

She fears that if she did not part of the time use a core text approach in reading, "...you might branch, go too far, which for some children could become frustrating."

During another conversation Glenda again said that textbooks are used to "...keep you on track for a given age, age group, or school group." She repeated that the text is never her "whole thing." If a student cannot cope with a text, she finds him something else, "another text or whatever."

While she accepts the externally imposed text as necessary, she feels free to use it simply as a guide, or to replace it if it is not effective with her students.

Her reader was selected from among several approved by the Province, while her grammar text was chosen for her by central office and two professors from the Teachers College. One of the professors had written some of the texts in the approved series.

The workbooks that go with the readers are both optional and mandatory. When a new text is used, the children are told that they can finish whatever pages they wish except those that directly relate to the story. In those cases, the children found that they couldn't do the questions until they had the vocabulary, and a little bit of background and discussion. Sometimes the children will say to her, "Oh, now I see what they mean by that page in the workbook."

The children work ahead on their extra practice pages if they have been sick, because parents "seem to be concerned, 'oh they're going to miss out on their work' ...if I have a workbook or an activity sheet that I can send home, Mother is satisfied,

and that's important too." Commercially prepared instructional materials can be a device that provides satisfaction for the various audiences of Glenda's instruction - the Junior high school teachers, her children, and her children's parents.

Glenda does not always use a text, or have it direct her program. In social studies, there is a guide and "my head," but no approved text. For that subject, she allows her children to choose whether they work from their own community to the rest of the world, or the other way around. She does use different social studies texts for digging up ideas.

In some cases, Glenda seems to be using commercially prepared materials as the core of her instruction without realizing it. While she said that she did not use a speller, the words learned did come from a text. It may be that she meant there was no spelling activity book. While there was no handwriting text, children were given assignment sheets from a manuscript writing book. The letters of the alphabet placed over the board which demonstrated proper letter shape were provided by the Ginn Company.

There is a new text in health which "I don't use wholeheartedly." There already was a "really well thought-out developmental program from primary to six," developed by a local health committee. She uses the text when she feels it is necessary. It appears that a text will be used to the extent that it either contains or reflects a sequential programme.

A problem that Glenda found with using one text or even program sequentially is that topics go on all year. In the case of health, safety appears in the form of labels on cans, bus safety, etc., throughout the year.

Several times during the year, Glenda departs from the core reader to use a "whole language approach." She describes this method as "taking a theme and building everything on it...using few skills worksheets."

When working with her grade threes, Glenda found in a book about Hallowe'en a simplified story which she photocopied. The children worked in pairs, to save money. They began by "tearing it apart," meaning, "...we'll read it, talk it and discuss it, pick out the Hallowe'en words and pick out the descriptive words." In a sense, the story from a theme book, had become a text-selected by that classroom teacher.

The children did things though, with the teacher-created text that they would not have been able to do with a commercial text. They are allowed to underline their words, make foot or sidenotes and put in synonyms.

She sees herself as a "scrounger," and told me that she has a closet full of materials that she has gathered over the years. There are five or six different books that she uses in different ways for Hallowe'en.

I asked her to compare these books on a conceptual repertory grid, which entailed saying in what ways the books compared were similar or different, so that aspects of books important to her would emerge.

Once particular constructs had been isolated, they were grouped according to their similarities. A similar cluster was more colour in the pictures, a folk tale, easier to read, considered by the teacher to be attractive to the student, interesting to young children, not a serious literary form, and easily dramatized.

When asked about their connections, Glenda said that not serious and easier go together; being easily dramatized would go with of interest to children because "...they feel they can get themselves into it and zit it up or zap it out whichever."

I mentioned to her that two books were judged by her to be especially similar. She found them both to be easier, eye catching, appealing to children, and short. She used the term "flippability," which she also interpreted as rectangular. Their content was similar because they had seen both on TV, "...the pictures were big, bright, colourful. And yet you could flip through it and get kind of, almost make

your own story from the picture."

When another three books were shown to be similar, she suggested it could be because of their TV association.

When two of the most different books were compared, their difference was mainly accounted for by the fact that the one book was continuous while the other had three distinct parts.

In the case of the other very different pair, their difference was mainly accounted for by the presence or absence of pictures. The one that lacked pictures did not provide visual cues. "...you had to pick it up and read it without having as many pictures to predict what's going to happen."

What had the most influence on other constructs was whether the teacher liked the material, whether it was attractive to the students, and whether it could be read and understood quickly. The least influential constructs were thickness of book, width greater than height, and usability.

Glenda spent quite a while on the construct that the teacher liked it. "We do the things that we think we really like and feel most comfortable with; we perhaps do a better job.... If you are enthused, and you like it, and it seems to like you, and you seem to build up resources for it, it seems to give it more punch than some other things."

When the books were compared both on a similar and not similar basis, and also on a numerical scale indicating degree of similarity, attractiveness to the student was shown to be the most important.

Glenda suggested that we add a construct for valuable to the teacher and valuable to the student. At the same time, she pointed out that what might be perceived as valuable by the student might in fact be superficial.

What she meant by attractive and unattractive books was whether a child on his own might pick up the material - because it was easier to read, had more colour, etc.

She finds that children put materials back when they don't have pictures, are too hard, or they don't understand them. Children, she says, do not want serious books. They want light, happy endings.

Some Reflections on Glenda's Choices

The books that elicited these constructs were strictly about Hallowe'en, and used exclusively for language arts. It is possible that the books that she might she might compare in another subject might provide different preferences.

Almost all the categories she provided were connected with being of interest to the student. If the question of what makes a material attractive to the teacher becomes an intermediary question to what makes it attractive to the student, our answer in Glenda's case would be that the material would need to have considerable colour in the big bright pictures, be a folk tale, or previously seen on television or in a filmstrip, be not a serious literary form, and be easily flip-throughable. The material needed to be short, easily understood, and have a happy ending.

When she discovered that she had given that the teacher like it a position of some importance, Glenda did not state what made the material attractive to her, although she conceded the construct's importance in an apologetic manner - I think because she felt the children's preferences should come first.

It is not clear what should be done with her request that valuable to the teacher and valuable to the student should be added as constructs. They did not emerge from the comparison exercises, which hopefully reveal sometimes unverbalized priorities. Were these two constructs that Glenda's altruism demanded she list whether she used them in practice or not?

I think from her other constructs, that these are close enough to "teacher liked it," and "of interest to children" that they can be accepted. While in Glenda's

vocabulary, "like" might be fairly frivolous, "of value," seems to mean that good teaching use can be made of the material.

Some Periferal Matters Relevant to Glenda's Selection of Instructional Materials

Where do her Instructional Ideas Come From?

When asked directly, Glenda said that she got her ideas from scholastic books, teachers' magazines, teacher talk in the staffroom and at conferences, and from student teachers. When asked why she did not mention the manual that was sitting beside her on her desk, she replied that its use was assumed - as was the use of curriculum guidelines which were locally developed. This would likely refer to the language guidelines which had been developed by a team of teachers from within the board.

In the case of social studies though, since there is no government approved textbook, she uses the Provincial guideline and "my head." She also examines individual copies of texts written for her grade level for ideas.

She said that if a social studies text had been prescribed, she would have used her own judgment on how it would be used. She would in any case have diversified using her own materials.

Her health course depends on a "well thought-out developmental program" which was developed by a local committee of teachers. Since the local program predates the text, the new book is "not used wholeheartedly." For her health program she draws on the newspapers and "Block Parent" quizzes for ideas.

A difficulty which she has with health, and to an extent most subjects, is that topics do not appear sequentially, but go on all year. Safety, for example, appears in the fall with bus safety, but also is dealt with when signs on cans are discussed.

The Teacher as Scrounger

"You know I think teachers are always scroungers to find whatever they can." Glenda will use "anything that is related" to her topic. For grammar she will use old texts and any book that she has bought that has grammar exercises. When she begins her planning for any topic, she will "just go to the corner cupboard there and dig through and see what she can find." It was that cupboard that contained the Hallowe'en books which were compared. It is likely that the materials in the cupboard are selected in the same way, and with the same criteria as the textbooks.

When Patti, a younger grade one teacher in the same school was interviewed, she also stated that she saw herself as a scrounger. While the discussion in her case involved health education, it was clear from looking around her room that she had gone beyond the text and workbooks for many of her materials.

Instructional Materials and Parent Involvement

One of the uses that Glenda makes of the workbooks related to her students' reader is to have the children work on the extra practice pages if they have been sick because parents "...seem to be concerned, 'Oh they're going to miss out on their work.' ...if I have a workbook or an activity sheet that I can send home, Mother is satisfied, and that's important too."

In discussing the replay of social studies lesson which I had videotaped, Glenda pointed out a boy who outlined a map at home with string with his dad. Her reason for singling this boy out during the instruction was that she tried to encourage children by having them do things at home with their parents.

While there may be a public relations aspect to these at-home activities, there is also an attempt to keep the parent instruction that is informed. "If they (the parents), feel that they can do things together at home, then they feel happy,

knowing what their child is doing."

To some extent, Glenda is interested in instructional materials which can be used both in and outside of class. These would be materials which could either be worked on independently by the children, such as workbooks, or be completed with the help of parents, as with the map which the boy and his father completed together at home.

Instructional Materials as Outside Experiences

Glenda discovered in watching herself teach on a videotaped playback, that she was not just asking a question and waiting for an answer. She seemed to be having a conversation. At first she thought she was just rambling on and on, until she realized that, "...you're getting through what you wanted, and yet you were listening to the children, and you pick up their interests, their comments, their points, and you try to relate it to their experiences if you know about them."

She believes that the children bring a large amount of information about any given topic into the school with them. "...not all they have learned is learned in school...children today have travelled and people have told them things. Television is also a good source of information. ...TV isn't always Sesame Street and American based." Besides their use of Canadian TV programs, they have picked up on Glenda's use of "Did you hear...?" regarding newspaper articles.

The children then, are encouraged to be scroungers for information outside the classroom, and to bring this knowledge into the class.

In Summary:

Whatever generalization was made about Glenda's criteria for materials selection would need to be specific to the subject being discussed, the grade level taught, and the year in which she was teaching.

She does seem to replicate the scant literature, which states that teachers prefer materials that interest, and reflect the needs of their students.

The instructional material which she uses must reflect a carefully developed program of studies, whether developed at the school board or Provincial level. If there is a conflict, she will follow the program of studies rather than the instructional material.

In many cases though, she will use the text to keep her on track, especially as in language or reading, where there are clearly agreed upon objectives.

When she talks about what interests children, as with her comparisons of Hallowe'en books, she most often mentions bright colours, a large number of pictures, a short continuous story, dramatizability, and a happy ending. These comments of course relate to grade three language arts. They might not be as important for a different subject or age group.

Change and variety are also important to Glenda. She does not want her children to say "Oh, we've done that before." She does want to give herself a variety of experiences.

The Generalizability of Glenda

A case study can be suggestive, but not prescriptive. It would be difficult to say to what extent Glenda, or her situation were unique. The brief subsequent interview with a grade one teacher in the same school indicated identity between the two in at least three areas. Both saw themselves as scroungers; when compelled to teach more than they intended during a period, they were amazed at how much the children had learned; they do not write detailed plan outlines. There may be also overlaps in their materials selection criteria.

I feel reasonably sure that an accurate picture of Glenda's decision-making processes is presented here. Most often her comments were spontaneous, rather than

suggested by me. Her choices on the construct grid reflect many of her comments during our conversations.

What is found here is in many ways a collaboration, in the sense that Glenda replied to and confirmed or expanded upon most of the observations I made from each interview. Many of the comments both in or out of quotes are in her words. To the degree that she can be self-conscious, this represents her processes of deciding about instructional materials.

Additional case studies might help us discover the kind and size of population that makes decisions in ways similar to Glenda's.